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SUBJECT: BULGARIAN ENGAGEMENT IN IRAQ IN 2008 AND BEYOND
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Classified By: Ambassador John Beyrle for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

[1](#)1. (S) Summary: Bulgaria's Parliament will soon ratify the extension of its 154-soldier mission in Iraq through April 1, [1](#)2009. Despite broad public disapproval and opposition from within the ruling Socialist Party, the ruling coalition continues, overall, to support engagement in Iraq and desires to be seen as a reliable partner in international security. While Bulgarian troops will almost certainly remain in Iraq through April 1, 2009, increased commitments of troops or resources or engagement beyond that date will depend primarily on: whether the U.S. and other EU nations are increasing or decreasing their troop levels, the assessed risk to personnel, the future status of Camp Ashraf and the results of Bulgaria's 2009 parliamentary elections. U.S. incentives, increased stability in Iraq, establishment of a Bulgarian embassy in Baghdad and increased economic opportunities for Bulgaria in Iraq would all improve the chances for deepening engagement. If the Bulgarians sense a general withdrawal by the United States and other allies, it will be more difficult for the stable but relatively weak ruling coalition, currently under great pressure to address domestic priorities, to deepen its commitments in Iraq in the years ahead. End Summary.

BULGARIA'S CURRENT COMMITMENTS

[1](#)2. (C) Bulgaria currently has 154 soldiers serving in Iraq at Camp Ashraf. Since March 2006 these forces have been responsible for overseeing Mujahedin-e Khalq (MEK) defectors within the camp's Temporary Interview and Protection Facility (now called Ashraf Refugee Camp) as a subordinate unit to a U.S. Military Police battalion. The Council of Ministers voted on December 12, 2007 to extend this mission and Parliamentary approval is expected before the end of February. Bulgaria also has one officer serving with the NATO training mission in Iraq. The Government of Bulgaria frequently makes a point of referring to its efforts in Iraq as a "humanitarian" mission, its combat troops (5 infantry battalions which rotated through on 6-month deployments, sustaining 13 KIAs) having left Iraq in 2006 prior to the start of the Ashraf mission. In order to be politically acceptable, any future Bulgarian involvement in Iraq would have to fit under a broad definition of humanitarian efforts.

CAPABILITIES: AVENUES FOR FURTHER ENGAGEMENT

[1](#)3. (S) In response to a July 2007 U.S. request for military engineers in Iraq, the General Staff recommended to the

Defense Ministry that Bulgaria deploy a 40-soldier engineering contingent of electricians, plumbers, bricklayers and carpenters to Victory Base Complex or Logistical Support Area Anaconda, with short-duration missions of about two months to forward operating bases in order to repair, renovate or build barracks and other key buildings. The General Staff recommended that Bulgaria could deploy three contingents of 40 engineers on consecutive six-month rotations, so long as the United States provided all necessary transportation and sustainment support. Despite support from the uniformed military and despite consistent Embassy engagement at all levels, political consensus behind this mission never materialized within the ruling coalition. The issue remains pending, but high-level sources have recently told us that the contingent is no longer in the government's plans.

¶4. (S) Another potential avenue for expanding Bulgarian participation in Iraq is through the NATO training mission. Bulgaria currently has only one officer participating in this capacity, but has the capability to fill multiple vacant NATO training mission staff positions such as operations advisor, security plans mentor or armorer. In a recent meeting with NATO DATTs, senior Bulgarian military officials said that Bulgaria would be amenable to increasing its participation in this mission by as many as four officers.

OBSTACLES: RISK, MONEY AND POLITICS

¶5. (S) Risk to personnel, lack of funds and the constraints of politics are the regularly-cited obstacles to increasing Bulgarian engagement in Iraq. While officials are genuinely concerned about risk to Bulgarian personnel serving in Iraq (and the potential political fallout of any additional

casualties), safety is clearly not the conclusive factor in the government's calculations. They remain reluctant to approve the deployment of engineers, despite the fact they would only be asked to operate within the perimeter of secure facilities. Improvement in the overall stability and security situation in Iraq would encourage further Bulgarian participation, but would not be the deciding factor.

¶6. (S) Budgetary issues are a very serious constraint. Although the United States has, in the case of the proposed engineering contingent, offered to pay for secure transport, training and sustainment of Bulgarian forces, the Government of Bulgaria would still be responsible for paying salary and combat bonuses to its troops. While these are minuscule costs compared to Bulgaria's budget as a whole, they must come directly out of the Ministry of Defense's (MOD) tightening budget. In the context of MDO's discretionary spending these costs are not insignificant, particularly considering the ruling coalition's decision to reduce defense spending from its current level of 2.5% of GDP to 2.1% this year. Additionally, the Bulgarian Government is under intense pressure from the public to focus its attention and spending on domestic priorities such as health care, education and pensions. Any amount of increased spending on overseas deployments will be politically unpopular. All overseas deployments -- even to neighboring Kosovo and Bosnia -- lack public support, in large part because they are seen as diverting funds away from domestic economic priorities where needs are urgent.

¶7. (S) Despite pledging in an earlier campaign to withdraw all forces from Iraq, the ruling Socialist Party has remained broadly supportive of the Ashraf mission and made clear its desire to be seen as a reliable partner in international security. Involvement in Iraq remains widely unpopular with the Bulgarian public: some 71 percent are opposed, according to the latest polls. A significant faction, comprising perhaps one-third of the members of the Socialist Party that leads the three-party coalition are also strongly opposed. Center-right parties of the opposition are traditional supporters of deployments, but they are too weak to help decisively. The ruling socialists also have a wary eye on

Parliamentary elections in 2009, when they expect to be seriously challenged by a new party led by Sofia mayor, Boyko Borissov. All of this means that the ruling coalition will focus on domestic concerns and will shy away from making new Iraq commitments unless part of a larger construct with other partners.

¶18. (S) Perhaps the most significant external political factor affecting Bulgarian calculations will be the actions of other allies. If other EU nations remain engaged in Iraq or even increase involvement in military or humanitarian projects, Bulgaria will likely follow suit, but if there is general perception of withdrawal, then it will be close to impossible for the ruling coalition to do more than maintain its current posture through April 2009.

INCENTIVES: BULGARIA'S STRATEGIC INTERESTS IN IRAQ

¶19. (S) Broadly speaking, most Bulgarian policymakers do not see the fight in Iraq in terms of their own strategic interests, but view involvement as their duty as a reliable U.S. partner and NATO Ally. Bulgaria sees economic interests in the region, as it has a long history of good economic relations with Iraq. Officials have expressed interest in seeing these rekindled as Iraq's economy rebuilds, and Bulgaria has settled Iraqi debt on Paris Club terms. The Bulgarians have not requested specific incentives in exchange for additional deployments to Iraq, though they are interested in expanding economic opportunities, such as in construction contracts and increased trade. They have also been working for almost two years to establish an embassy in Baghdad and have asked for U.S. assistance in this regard. The idea of a consulate in Irbil has been seriously discussed within the Foreign Ministry as has the concept of using 2008 (the fiftieth anniversary of Iraqi-Bulgarian diplomatic relations) as a platform for diplomatic and cultural engagement. Economic incentives as well as potential rewards in the form of high-level visits (the Bulgarians have invited Secretary Rice to Bulgaria around the time of the NATO

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Summit) could be instrumental in persuading the government to spend political capital on additional commitments to Iraq.

THE FUTURE OF ASHRAF

¶10. (S) Since Bulgarian involvement is currently centered around Camp Ashraf, the future of the camp and the resolution of MEK issues is central to the future of Bulgaria engagement in Iraq. The Bulgarian Government is anxious to know U.S. plans for the facility and has asked to be notified if any significant moves are planned. If it were judged that Bulgarian forces could be best used elsewhere in Iraq, it is possible the Bulgarians would be willing to take on a new mission in place of Ashraf, though this would depend to a great extent on what was asked of them. Missions involving a combat role or a great deal of risk would be non-starters, but humanitarian, engineering or reconstruction roles might be acceptable.

COMMENT

¶11. (S) Comment: The ruling coalition is focusing its energy and resources on domestic concerns and would prefer to simply extend the Ashraf mission through April 1, 2009 and leave it at that. Although Bulgaria strongly desires to be seen as a reliable and competent partner in international security, the political optics of increasing deployments while other allies draw down or will soon draw down force levels presents a very difficult challenge. The public unpopularity of overseas deployments and lack of strong support for a more robust strategy within the ruling coalition makes this even more difficult. While Bulgarian forces can be expected to remain at Ashraf through April 1, 2009, any significant new deployments are unlikely without political or economic incentives and high-level U.S.

engagement. End Comment.
Beyrle